

The masked man drew a packet from his shirt

A Show of Hands

By ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

Author of "The Abyssinian Prune-Hound," "The Dog from the Skies," etc.

Rich old Ethan Brock claimed he had no friends—but Bruce, his collie, wouldn't have it that way

Novelette—Complete

CHAPTER I.

A CANNY MESSENGER.

"IT was the first vacation you've had in three years, eh?" rasped Ethan Brock. "Now, isn't that terrible? I wonder you've kept alive so long."

Carter, his secretary, fidgeted, his clean-cut young face reddening at the sardonic thread in the dry voice.

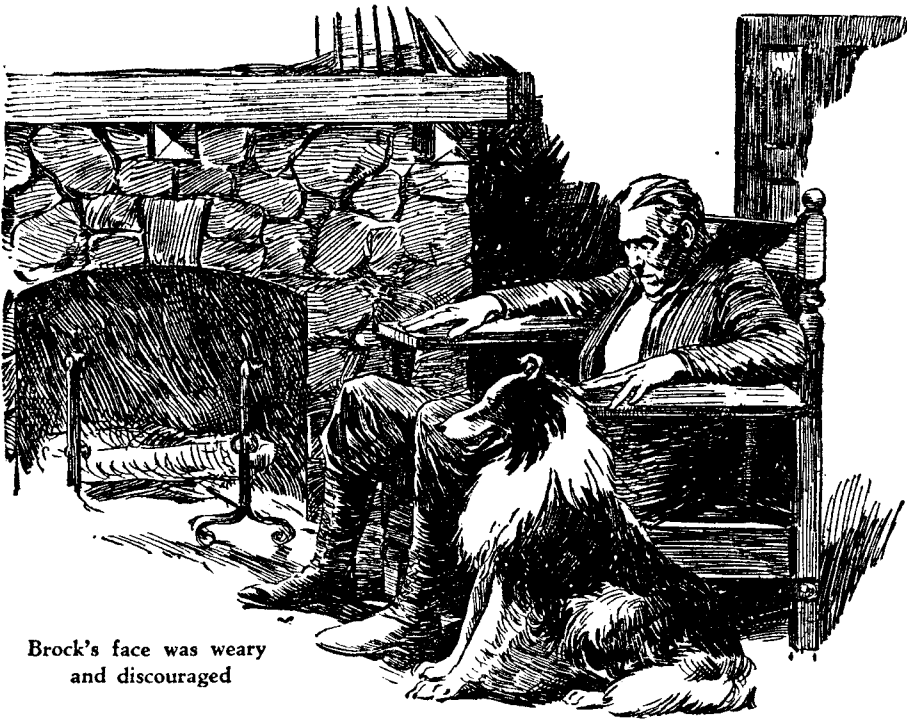
"I—I just happened to mention it," said the secretary.

"Of course you did," assented Brock. "I noticed that. Everybody just happens to mention the same thing. If I've heard one man say he hasn't

had a vacation in so-and-so-many years I've heard fifty say it. And always with a funny mixture of brag and self-pity. If all those non-vacation speeches were laid end to end, they'd reach from here to their speakers' chances of winning a real success in life. And that's farther than from here to Mars."

"Yes, sir," said Carter, seeking to turn back to the work on his desk and thus cut short the old financier's harangue. But Ethan Brock would not have it so. When the oldster got started on an oration, he was non-stopplable.

"This vacation I'm going on, tomorrow," Ethan continued, "this outing I've been postponing till you could



Brock's face was weary
and discouraged

get back here from your fortnight's loafing—well, this will be *my* first vacation since—guess when?"

"I don't know, sir," replied Carter. "I don't remember your taking a vacation in the three years since I've been working for you."

"No," said Brock. "And if you were to try to remember the date of my last vacation, you'd have to remember back to a long while before you were born. You're somewhere around thirty-two, aren't you? And I was sixty-two, last week. I was in the middle of a high school vacation when I had to hustle for a job, because my father died insolvent."

"I was sixteen years old that summer. It was my last vacation. I've never had time for another, till now. I haven't time for this one. And I don't want it. But I'm taking it. Because that silly trio of specialists say I must. At least, that's the excuse I'm

giving. And that's why I've waited till you got back. Not that you're indispensable, at all. The Indispensable Employee isn't born, yet. And when he shall be, his name won't be Carter."

"No, sir," answered Carter, quietly; once more making as though to turn back to the desk.

Three years of service as old Ethan Brock's personal secretary had taught the young man to exercise a tireless self-control. For Brock was in no sense a pleasant employer. He demanded hard work of his employees. He set them an example by working five times as hard as did any of them. Moreover, long decades of climbing unaided from shabby genteel poverty to multimillionairehood, had soured his temper and shaken his health and nerves. Cruel experiences during that grueling climb had left him with a wholesale distrust of those around him and of the world at large.

Now that he had more money than he could spend and more power than he could use, his one wholly trusted friend was his big collie, Bruce. On Bruce he centered the affection that should have been divided among a horde of human friends.

"Those three pill-financiers," resumed Brock, "tell me I must get out into the open—up in the mountains—for at least a month; and I must live as close to nature as I can. I told them that was what ailed me; that I'd spent too many years close to nature—human nature—and that it had pretty well wrecked me. But they kept at me till I rented that Charles camp, up at Gusepple Lake. Old Vandam Charles spent a fortune in making it as rough and primitive as a lumber camp; and in stocking his lake. I'm taking it over, along with three of his men. I'd rather go to jail. But—"

The almost shut study door was shoved wide, wholly without ceremony. The bang of the knob against a chairback made Brock turn about, scowling at the intrusion. But the glower was wiped from his lean old face as he saw who had broken in thus, on his business privacy, without taking the trouble to knock for admittance. Ethan's leathery lips softened into a grin.

Across the rug-dotted expanse of floor, from the threshold, a dog was advancing playfully toward him. The intruder was a collie lithely powerful of build, massive of burnished coat, classic of head. His deep-set dark eyes just now were dancing with fun. There was a ludicrous strut to his wontedly sedate walk. Straight up to his master he came.

"Message, eh?" Brock greeted him, running a bony hand along the dog's collar and bringing to light a twist of

paper from beneath the tumble of mane.

"You have good eyes, sir," ventured Carter. "My own eyes are fairly sharp. But I didn't see that bit of paper as Bruce came toward you."

"You didn't see it," explained Brock, "because it wasn't in sight. The instant I set eyes on him I knew he had a message. He never struts in that fool way, any other time. Geoghan taught him to carry messages, the first month Bruce was here. It isn't much of a stunt. But I encourage it because it makes the dog so vainglorious and so happy. I don't know why it should, but it does. He seems to think he's performing the cleverest trick in the world. Geoghan says many dogs feel that way about it. And, after all, maybe it is rather wise of him never to make a mistake in the person he'd told to carry notes to."

WHILE he rambled on, Brock untwisted the paper, glanced at it, scribbled a word or two under its few written lines, retwisted the note and thrust it back into a clip in Bruce's collar.

"Take it to Horoson, Bruce," he bade the collie. "Then you can come back here if you like."

The dog trotted proudly and mincingly upon his mission. Ethan grinned in fond amusement at him as he went.

"My housekeeper wanted to know if I'm dining at home this evening," he told Carter. "I suppose she didn't dare interrupt me at my work by coming here to ask. So she sent the only member of the household that can interrupt me as often as he wants to. Shrewd woman! What's that pile of stuff you're sorting?" he asked, watching Moylan Carter's handling of a

sheaf of letters and papers he had taken from one side of the desk.

"The C. G. & X. layout, sir. You told me you wanted it all docketed and an abstract on it, before you left. I'll have to hurry if it's to be finished in time. The—"

"It would rend my great tender heart to be the guilty cause of your hurrying, Carter. But I've special reason for wanting that C. G. & X. matter set in motion before I go. In fact, that's one of the two reasons why I'm resigned to going at all. The first and chief reason I'm willing to go is because a month in the hills away from civilization and motor cars, is going to be a grand treat for Bruce.

"Geoghan tells me a collie is as out of place in a big city—even a city as big as Granite here—as a hawk in a canary cage. Geoghan says collies are happiest when they have hills to gallop over and forests to range through. Says that's their natural element.

"No, Geoghan didn't say 'natural element,'" Brock corrected himself. "Chauffeurs don't talk like Harvard men who are trying to patronize the rest of mankind—no offense to *you*, Carter—and Geoghan's precise words, as close as I recall them, were: 'That's up their street.'

"So, the main reason I'm going to throw away a month's moneymaking and keep a mob of financiers and speculators waiting for my next move in C. G. & X. and boring myself by going back to nature—dreary old Mother Nature!—is to give Bruce a month of jolly wilderness life. He— Hello, Bruce!" he broke off, as the collie sauntered into the room again. "I was just talking about you, old friend."

The collie came up to him, with none of the mincing pride of a few minutes earlier. His message-carrying was

completed. Once more he was his stately self. He thrust his cold nose into his master's cupped hand; then laid his chin on Brock's wizened knee, looking up into the tired old face with a calm equality of chumship. Ethan rumped the dog's furry ears and scratched him under the chin. Then he pushed aside the questing nostrils, saying with a dry laugh:

"No, Bruce. I haven't got any animal crackers in my pocket to-day. Maybe Carter has. Ask him."

Gravely, the dog strolled over to where the secretary sat. He put his long muzzle under Carter's forearm and thrust his head sharply upward. The joggling gesture knocked the man's busily plying fountain pen to the floor. As Carter stooped to pick it up, Brock said:

"Bruce likes you. He likes you, much. He likes you a good deal better than he likes Geoghan or any one else around here, except me. I wonder why."

Moylan Carter looked up again from his work; saying modestly:

"I've heard that dogs know by instinct what humans are to be trusted."

"Rot!" snorted Brock. "Governor Baxter, of Maine, sent his chum collie to live in a state penitentiary as a pal for the prisoners. Out of all those hundreds of convicts there must have been at least one or two who weren't saints or even wholly trustworthy. Yet the dog made friends with the lot of them. Is a dog wiser than a human? You and I can't tell by instinct whether a man is to be trusted or isn't. How can a dog? He can't. Bruce happens to like you.

"Once, forty years ago, I liked a man who later robbed me of every cent I had. Bruce doesn't care for Geoghan. Just as once I didn't care for a man

who later saved me from bankruptcy. I trust none of my fellow-bipeds. But I come nearer to trusting Geoghan than any one else. I've proved him—for my own amusement—in fifty different ways. That chauffeur of mine comes close to being a *man*. And he loves Bruce. Yet Bruce has no special use for him. That is because Bruce is no wiser than we humans are. He likes you—because he likes you. Just as he has chosen me for his god, because he has chosen me for his god. That's all there is to it."

CARTER shut his lips tightly, to force back an obvious retort. He bent low over the papers he was docketing. Old Ethan Brock eyed him approvingly.

"You have your temper and your tongue well in hand, Carter," he said. "Now let's come to the other reason why I don't look on this month of exile with a one hundred per cent distaste. That reason is the C. G. & X."

Carter turned toward his chief in genuine curiosity.

"I don't understand," he said.

"If you had studied that mass of papers and letters and schedules and wires, instead of just codifying it," suggested Brock, "and if you had profited by a tenth of what you ought to have learned from me during the past three years, you would understand every atom of what I have in mind. Or if you bothered to read the financial pages in the newspapers."

"I read—"

"But you don't digest. If you did, you'd know the quarterly meeting of the C. G. & X. directors is just thirty-three days off. The day after I'm due to come back from camp. You would know that the operators and the rest are not only spraining their brains to

guess whether or not the merger is going through, but that they're worrying over the persistent rumor—I started the rumor, by the way, and I kept it going—that C. G. & X. is going to pass its dividends for the first time in eleven years."

"I—"

"The answer to either of those questions would have an important effect on the road's stock, on the Exchange. And I'm the only one who can give that answer or even a hint of it. And I'm going to clear out for a whole month. Get the point, now? See why it amuses me to think of the squirmings and the guesses as to what I'm going to tell my dummies to do at the directors' meeting? The directors themselves don't know. They won't know till I tell them. That's why I picked them as directors.

"It would be funny, wouldn't it," he went on whimsically, "if I should decide not to get back to Granite in time for the quarterly meeting? Belknap and his crowd would be able to stampede the dummies. That would mean a crazy boom of the stock; and the right men would get rich overnight. The merger—"

"But would they dare?"

"Not if I'm here. And I'm going to be here. It's a way I've got. Even if I were taken sick up in camp, I could get word to my own men, through Griggs, to vote my way on the dividend and to swing the merger for me. So if you're planning to put any unsparable cash into margins, on a guess, I advise you to lay off. If I'm alive, the board's majority are going to vote as I want them to. They don't know yet how I want them to vote, any more than you do. But they'll know when they come to the meeting; even if *you* won't. I—"

"It a matter of no interest to me," interposed Carter, stiffly. "I don't speculate."

"No? Neither does Bruce. That's why you're both reasonably sure of your next meal. Come along, Brucie, and let's look over that ton of fishing tackle the Firth & Garrange people sent me from New York. Not that we're likely to use any of the silly stuff. Lord, but it's a tragedy for a man of my age to have a vacation and then not have the barest idea what to do with it!"

CHAPTER II.

NEW YOUTH.

GUSEPPLE LAKE was a scanty thirty miles from the city of Granite. Yet, to all intents and purposes, it might well have been ten times as far away. It was as primitive as it had been in Colonial days. Quite as primitive—but more painstakingly so—was the Vandam Charles camp.

Up a bumpy trail to the camp, a limousine wobbled and rocked. At the wheel was Brock's chauffeur, Geoghan. Sitting in conscious state on the seat beside him, Bruce surveyed the wild landscape with a keen interest. His sensitive nostrils pulsed to the myriad forest smells. The big dog was in his element.

Crumpled sulkily in the rear seat, Ethan Brock surveyed with glum disfavor the wilderness about him. He shivered a little at the ice-tinge in the mountain air.

A grimly dignified man of perhaps sixty sat beside Ethan. This was Paul Griggs, his attorney and chief aide. The two had been talking strenuously and fast during the thirty-mile ride from Granite; Brock reiterating a series of commands whose scope was

Napoleonic; Griggs nodding comprehension and jotting down an occasional note. As the car lurched to a halt at the rough-hewn doorway of the camp's main dwelling, Brock was visibly annoyed at the enforced ending of the conference.

"Well," he grumbled, "there are a mort of things yet to be cleared up. And, besides, there's the matter of the proxies. I'll have Geoghan drive up here for me a week from to-day and take me back to cinch the last details. Be at my house at eleven, sharp. I won't lose more than half a day of my wretched vacation, by the trip; I'm sorry to say. And the doctors needn't know I played truant. Good-by."

Two of the camp employees carried his luggage indoors. Brock stood staring at the receding car as it bumped away in the twilight, carrying the only two men on earth for whom he had the slightest regard or trust; his chauffeur and his attorney, in the order named. Ethan was aware of a queer loneliness. Then a cold nose was thrust into his cupped palm. He looked down to see Bruce, vibrant with joyous eagerness.

"The pleasure is all yours, Brucie," he said, ungraciously. "Now, let's go inside and explore this hundred-thousand-dollar log shack. Why did I ever come to such a dump, anyhow? I haven't been in the country, for even a night, since I was sixteen. I'm going to hate it."

The Japanese house-servant's really creditable dinner of broiled trout and other de luxe wilderness fare did little to lift the old man's gloom. He was kept awake for hours thereafter by the choir of katydids and treefrogs and whippoorwills; he who was wont to sleep undisturbed amid the clangor of a city.

Bruce added his share to his master's

insomnia by snoring lustily on his bedside mat and then by barking with much gay vigor at an owl whose wings winnowed eerily on its flight past the bedroom's open windows.

IT was late when at last Ethan Brock dozed. And it was not yet sunrise when he awoke. By all precedents, the old man should have come to his senses in a raging temper from his bad night. Instead, he lay blinking drowsily about him; too drugged, for the moment, by the rarefied balsam air to remember where he was.

He saw the tree branches pressing close to the wide windows and the paling sky and a flash of silver-laden water through the mist beyond. Above his head were the elaborately primitive rafters of the bedroom's ceiling. As he took in his surroundings, memory played an odd trick on the tired old brain.

Yes, it was daylight. His vacation had just begun. He had come to the farm the evening before; the evening after school closed for the summer. For two whole months there would be no studying of lessons. There would be not a thing to do but fish—the sport he loved best—and to loaf around in the woods. And here he was wasting his precious playtime, in bed!

Laughing from sheer boyish happiness he swung out of bed and to the floor.

But at his first vigorous bound from under the covers, recollection and reality came rushing back upon him. Not alone from wider wakefulness, but because every one of his age-stiffened joints cried out in protest at the sudden motion.

He stood swaying beside the bed, clutching at a chair to regain his balance. The boyishly happy laugh died

on his lips, leaving his face grayer and older and more deeply lined than ever. He knew well, now, where he was and who he was. The knowledge brought him far keener pain than had the wrenching of his stiff joints.

Yet, far down in his heart, there was still the illogically glad feeling of adventure that had been his a moment earlier. He did not understand it. He did not want to understand it. But he vowed he would profit by it before it should fade.

Bruce had jumped up, jubilant and alert, sensing, as ever, his master's mood. The dog ran over to the bedroom door; then invitingly back to Ethan. Brock rumbled the collie's ears and began to draw on his own clothes. He dressed with a haste bred of more than the stark chill of the mountain dawn.

"Patience, Brucie!" he exhorted the dog. "I'm not as lucky as you are. I can't start off in the same clothes I slept in. But we *are* starting. I don't know where. And it doesn't matter. We'll adventure, you and I; and we'll try to get into mischief. All ready. Come on!"

Noiselessly, Brock led the way out of the bedroom and across the raftered main hall, and let himself out of the front door. Noiselessly, Bruce danced along beside him. As they stepped out onto the rustic veranda Ethan became aware of the reason for his own soundless progress. He found he had thrown back to a long forgotten boyhood habit; and was carrying his boots in his hand.

This he discovered when he brought his stockinged toe into sharp contact with the screen door's jamb. Again he grinned, if a trifle sheepishly, and sat down on the steps to draw on his footgear. The petty incident tickled him.

He did not know his usual austere sour self in this resurrected guise of youth. Yet, again, he had an illogical sense of gaiety that was for nearly a half-century alien to him.

"AND now, Brucie," he announced, "we're going fishing, you and

I. Ever been fishing? Grand sport, Bruce, though I'd forgotten it was. There's the boat house down there. Where there's a boat house there are boats; and maybe there's fishing tackle, too. No harm in finding out. I'm not going back into the house for my own rods and wake every one up; and have a pair of obsequious guides spoiling our fun. Hurry up, before they catch us!"

As ever, the lonely old man talked to his dog as to a fellow-human. This after the custom of thousands of other lonely men, though Brock did not know it. Well did he realize that the collie could not understand one spoken word in ten. But it was a pleasure, just the same, to talk to him. And always Bruce responded to the tone and to the mood, even if not to the actual language.

To the ornately primitive boat house they made their way; as the curls of lake mist began to rise eerily from the water at the approach of the sun and at the breath of the dawn wind. The lake was still as smooth as melted silver beneath its dissolving cloak of white vapor. Ghostly the tall evergreens stood guard over it. The air had a bite. But it had, too, a tang that went to the head. Ethan Brock forgot to shiver as he suck great gulps of the balsam-tinged atmosphere into his lungs.

"Bruce," he said, "breakfast is always a thing of horror to me. You know that. Because I always give you most of mine. But this morning, when

we get back, breakfast is going to taste like *food*. Not like predigested hay. I wish I had told that Jap to give me a five-pound steak, all sprinkled with chops, Brucie, and maybe a bare half dozen eggs or so as a side dish. Eggs with a two-pound sliver of ham to make them more palatable. And perhaps just a few fish. We—"

He stopped, with a grunt of disappointment, in front of the boat house. A gleaming new padlock held shut its single huge door. The gates of the piscatorial paradise were slammed in the questing pilgrim's face. Then, of a sudden, Ethan Brock's clouded face cleared.

Some twenty feet away a cranky little old boat was half in and half out of water. A bedraggled little apology for a boat; presumably deemed unfit for shelter with the lordly boat house's aristocratic craft. Such a disreputable and unreliable old tub as might belong to the children of one of the guides. Such a boat as had lain on the pond-edge at the foot of the farm's orchard; where a boy named Ethan Brock had fished, nearly fifty years earlier.

Recollection of the careless ways of boy fishermen sent Brock toward the tub at a rheumatic trot. If only—! Yes, by all that was sublimely lucky, there it was. Lying carelessly across the gunwale was a spliced and battered half-length bamboo pole. Not a rod. A pole. And, dangling from it was a thick old fifteen-foot line; with a rusty hook on its end. Yes—again showing that boys had not changed since Ethan's youth—and in the leaky craft's leaky bottom reclined three very dead minnows.

Feverishly the old man shoved the tub into the lake. Feverishly, yet cautiously, he boarded the eccentric thing; pulling the splintered oars from under

ARGOSY

the seat. With shaky fingers he dug the hook into the gills of the shiniest minnow.

"All set!" he babbled to his collie. "Get aboard, Brucie! Steady, there! Don't upset us. Now lie down. Not there. Amidships. Try to trim boat. And keep still. One sidewise move, and this wreck will turn turtle. Know the difference between a fish-pole and a fishing-rod, Brucie? A rod is what a city chap holds over the water. A pole is what a country boy catches fish with. This thing here is a pole. *We're off!*"

HE bent to the chipped oars, clumsily manipulating the boat out from shore into the swirling mists of the lake. There he threw his baited line astern.

"This rheumatic wrist of mine isn't up to casting, Bruce," he explained to the happily excited collie, as he began again to row, paralleling the shore. "And there's no swivel for trolling. And I'm not going to insult either of us by 'still fishing.' (Besides, the minnow's too dead.) So we're going to skitter. Lots of good fish caught by skittering, Bruce, if you know the trick. Especially when it's dawn and there's mist on the water. We—"

He gasped, and lunged forward. The pole butt had shot from its brace under his heel, and was disappearing over the stern. By some minor miracle, the gnarled fingers seized upon it, as it was about to follow the rest of the pole into the lake. Seized, and clung hard. The fifteen feet of cheap line was as taut as a bowstring. Instinctively, Ethan Brock reversed the pole, halfway, to give the fish a chance to fight against whatever slight resilience it might have. It was then that the tense old face relaxed into a smile of triumph.

"Lie down, Bruce!" Brock exhorted the collie which had scrambled to his feet in wild excitement. "Want to capsize us just as we've made our strike? This is a whale we've got. A reg'lar ol' he-one. And it was grand luck that the pole went out so far before I caught it. Gave him just time enough to bolt the minnow and get snubbed."

As he spoke, Brock was doing a really creditable bit of playing of his prize. He knew his pole was all but non-resilient and that his much-used line was wholly unreliable. But he also knew he had on his hook a fish of more than fairish size. He renewed unconsciously his childhood knack of handling such a situation.

Slowly, with infinite care, he pulled in, hand over hand, ever and again giving the struggling fish enough leeway to ease the heavier part of the line's tug; taking advantage of every inch he could gain.

The collie lay obedient in the bottom of the boat, yet trembling with the echo of his master's rare excitement. The sun butted its rim over the mountain-crest. At the same instant the fish broke water, rising high in the air, its curved body shining and distinct in every line.

"Small-mouth bass!" babbled Ethan to his thrilled collie as the fish crashed back into the water. "Four pounds if it's an ounce. And he didn't shake the hook free, either, Brucie. That was his game. He—"

The fight left him no further scope for words. Panting, weary, dizzy, Brock continued right skillfully to play his catch. Bit by bit, with intervening rushes for freedom—rushes which grew feebler as the minutes sped—the bass was brought alongside. A twitch of the line, aided by impromptu land-

ing-net tactics from Ethan's hat; and the bass came over the side and into the boat's awash bottom.

Still securely hooked, the fish fell full onto the back of the couchant Bruce. This rude and wriggling impact was too much for the collie's recollection of the order to lie down. Indignantly, Bruce leaped to his feet and far to one side. Ethan was still leaning far to that same side.

The cranky tub proceeded to turn turtle.

INTO the ice-chill waters of the mountain lake tumbled man and dog; Ethan continuing to clutch like grim death at the slimy line.

Instantly, the two heads bobbed to the surface. Instantly, Bruce struck out for the sputtering man, and seized him by the collar. But Ethan would not have it so.

"Let go, you fuzzy idiot!" he commanded, coughing and treading water. "I could swim before you were born. Give me sea-room! Let go!"

Gripping the line in his teeth and with the pole floating at one side of him and the fish flapping wildly over his other shoulder, Brock struck out for the fifty-foot-distant shore.

As a lad he had been a notable swimmer. And swimming is one form of exercise whose practice is never forgotten. Easily and fast Ethan swam the few intervening yards between the upset boat and the bank.

Down from the camp two guides were running, at top speed; casting off their coats as they came. The foremost of them splashed out into kneedeep water, just as Ethan Brock felt bottom under his feet; and as Bruce reached dry ground.

"Stay where you are!" gurgled Ethan, waving back the guides, as he

made his way shoreward to them. "I'm all right. I won a medal for swimming before your fathers were born. One of you take this fish. So. Have it weighed; and then tell the Jap I want it for my breakfast—along with whatever other food he's got. One of you go up and take an armful of crash towels to my room. Say I'll be ready for breakfast in twenty minutes. Good and ready for it, at that."

By all medical precedent, Ethan Brock was due for an attack of double pneumonia, or at the very least for a month of agonizing inflammatory rheumatism accompanied by heart-strain and shock as a result of his plunge into ice cold water on a chilly morning, at the age of sixty-two and in a run-down physical condition. But ten minutes of harsh rubdown and dry clothes sent him to breakfast in a glow he had not known for years, and with a ravenous appetite. Nor was he a penny the worse for his ducking, then or later. This a little to his own amazement and greatly to his secret pride.

So began a wonder-time, for Brock and his dog, high up in the wilderness. Brock spent his days in fishing and in tramping the woods and lazing in the sun. His nights were passed in such dreamless and dead sleep as had not been his since he began to earn his living. The man seemed to grow younger daily.

The torn nerves quieted, the long-lost appetite had returned with a rush; the months of insomnia were forgotten. Nature was cradling and soothing and healing her prodigal son, in nature's own immemorial way. Ethan Brock marveled at himself. But Ethan Brock rejoiced. For the first occasion within his memory, he was having a good time. And he reveled vastly in it.

To a younger and livelier holiday-

seeker his routine at the camp might have seemed tame. To Ethan it was pure delight, every minute of it. His daily hours of solemn fishing, his brief morning swim, his leisurely rambles through the nearer forest trails—always with Bruce as a rapturously happy comrade—these were things of utter joy for Brock; things to renew his forgotten youth for him; things to give him a glad vigor and zest for life that he had not known for many a bleak year.

CHAPTER III.

THE AMBUSH.

IN fact, Ethan was childishly annoyed when, a week later, his chauffeur, Geoghan, appeared with a huge limousine to fetch him back to Granite for the conference he had arranged with Griggs. Brock had looked forward to this half-day of business, when he made the appointment, as a welcome break in his month of dreary exile. Now he swore at himself for having made it. He grudged every hour of absence from camp.

"What are you grinning at, Geoghan?" he demanded peevishly, as the chauffeur ran up the porch steps to guide him down into the car.

"Sorry, sir," said Geoghan. "I didn't know I was grinning. I—I was kind of tickled to see you looking so perky and well-like. You're looking like another man, just in this one week, if you'll let me make so bold as to say so, sir."

"Geoghan," rasped Brock, "next to Bruce, you come nearer being human than any one I know. Like the way I look, eh? And you care enough about the Old Grouch to grin because he's getting well? I'd figure any other man

was lying, if he said that to me. Maybe you're lying, too, for all I know. But I doubt it. Somehow I doubt it."

"Yes, sir," said Geoghan, helping Brock into the car; then adding as he looked around him: "Where's the big dog, sir? Isn't he coming along?"

"No," returned Ethan, "he is not. Just because I have to spend half a priceless day in the rackety, smelly city, it's no reason why I should penalize Bruce. I shut him in my room, just now; and I told the Jap to let him out five minutes after we're gone. He can have his swim and his ramble in the forest, even if I can't."

In a little more than an hour and a half, the car halted under the porte cochère of Ethan Brock's mausoleum-like house in Granite. The butler was at the door as the limousine slowed to a stop. So was Brock's secretary, young Moylan Carter. Ethan favored them with a nod as he mounted the veranda steps. Then to Geoghan he said:

"Drive over to Judge Griggs's office and tell him I'm here and ready for him. Bring him back with you. He—"

The rasping old voice trailed away. His keen old eyes focused on something that was turning into the drive, fifty yards distant. The "something" was a galloping collie, dust streaked and panting.

"Bruce!" babbled Geoghan.

"Bruce!" echoed Ethan Brock, as the dog cantered eagerly up to him. "Bruce, you old blackguard! How did you ever get here? I left you shut up in my room at camp. How—?"

"Begging pardon, sir," ventured Geoghan, "you said you told the Jap to let him out in five minutes. That explains it."

"Explains what? Do you mean to say he trailed us here?"

"He trailed *you*, sir. There's many

a dog than can follow the scent of his own master's car. He caught that scent. We had to drive terrible slow, you'll remember, sir, over that bum road. It gave him a chance to get here just behind us. But he must have pretty near run his legs off, to do it in this time. Good old Bruce!"

"Miraculous old Bruce!" corrected Brock. "Why, there's nothing that a dog can't do, Geoghan! Every day he gives me some new surprise, in the way of cleverness—and—and loyalty. Ran thirty miles, away from the woods he loves. Just to be where *I* am. He—Hurry over to Judge Griggs's," he commanded, angry at his own rare show of emotion.

"Carter, have you got everything ready for us, in my study? Prowse," he continued, to the butler, "bring Judge Griggs to my study as soon as he gets here. Meantime, have some water brought for Bruce. The old fellow must be half dead with thirst after that hot run. Have it sent up to my study. Come along, Carter. Bruce, when we go back to camp, this afternoon, you won't have to run. You'll ride. Like the gentleman you are. Come to the study and rest."

AND so the golden month of camp life wore itself toward a close.

Master and dog were out of doors practically all the time. Stronger and stouter grew frail old Ethan. His appetite continued. His raw nerves were healed. His insomnia was gone. He smiled in tolerant self-contempt as he found himself counting wistfully the bare handful of days that remained before he must leave all this and return to Granite for his historic C. G. & X. battle.

Late on the afternoon of the day before he was due to return to Granite,

Ethan set off on a farewell ramble along his best loved forest trail; the trail he traversed always at least once a day. It was a path artistically laid out and winding in picturesque fashion through leafy walls so dense as to seem impenetrable; with here and there a charming vista that ended in a background of mountain or of lake. The trail was a veritable triumph of the landscaper's art. Vandam Charles had been proud of it.

To-day, as man and dog padded along the carpet of evergreen needles side by side the solemn hush of the forest was split by a hideous noise of spitting and snarling and caterwauling; in brief, the din of a right lively cat-fight. It came, evidently, from some point on the trail beyond the next bend.

No normal dog could resist such a lure. Assuredly, Bruce could not. With a gleeful challenge bark he bolted forward at express-train speed, vanishing from sight around the wide curve before Ethan could voice a recall. Then Brock bawled after him:

"Come back, you fool! You'll only get your nose scratched. Back!"

As he called, Ethan heard the invisible collie break into a roar of fury that had something baffled and astounded in its timbre. A dog does not make that sound when he is breaking up a cat-fight and sending its participants scuttling up the nearest trees. Brock forced himself into stiffly rapid motion.

He rounded the curve to find no sign of the collie. The green walls that lined the path were still swaying violently at one point. On the needle-strewn trail, just there, the soft loam disclosed the marks of several moccasined human feet; interspersed with streaks such as might well be made by the claws of a struggling dog.

Ethan Brock was scarcely aware of this sign of strife, before the close-set evergreens on either side of the path were parted. Silently, two men stepped out into the open, one at Brock's right and one at his left. A third man slipped into the trail from behind. A fourth appeared from around the bend directly in front.

Their moccasins made no noise on the soft ground. The men were roughly clad and were hatless. Across the entire face of each of them a close-fitting white handkerchief mask was fastened. Two small eyelets were the masks' only openings. Through these ill-discerned eyes glinted non-committally.

"Bruce!" shouted Ethan Brock, his hand diving toward the left breast pocket of his coat.

From somewhere came again that baffled roar and a thrashing about in the undergrowth. But the collie did not appear.

BEFORE Brock's stiff fingers could travel two inches toward the little automatic pistol he always carried in his left inner coat pocket, the man nearest him had thrust forward one arm, with the speed of light; and had caught Ethan's right wrist. The man on the other side seized his left wrist with the same speed and deftness.

In the same set of motions the man who first had seized him ran an expert hand into the coat front and, with the smooth skill of a pickpocket, drew forth Ethan's automatic.

There was no hint of roughness in either of the assailants' actions. Indeed, they were gentleness itself; exerting only enough strength to prevent Brock from struggling for the pistol. As soon as he had been relieved of the

weapon, they let go and stepped almost respectfully back from him.

Ethan peered from one to another of the four masked strangers, his leathery face as void of expression as their own white masks, except that his piercing black eyes blazed like a striking snake's.

He was as thoroughly self-possessed as when he fought some intricately perilous financial battle.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, his dry tone as expressionlessly calm as his visage, "I infer this is a kidnaping."

None of the men spoke or moved.

"I infer it," resumed the dry old voice, speaking without the faintest trace of emotion or even of ordinary interest in the theme, "I infer it is a kidnaping and not a hold-up. Because you must know I am likely to have money on me; and you have made no move to get it. It would have been quite as simple as to steal my pistol.

"Also, because you handled me with an exaggerated tenderness instead of yanking me about. I infer you want to keep me unhurt, if you can. Yes," he finished his deductions, reflectively, "it must be a case of kidnaping. Besides, the small amount of cash I carry in my clothes out here in the woods isn't worth splitting four ways."

Still there was no answer. Mutely, the four men stood on all sides of him, as though waiting for something or for some one. Noting this afresh, Ethan resumed his dryly voiced chain of inference:

"I take it you are waiting for your leader or chief or boss or main guy or The Works—or whatever is the newest title for the head of an enterprise like this. I infer also that it is he—alone or with some one's help—who kidnaped my dog. Clever work, that. Not brilliant, of course. Brilliancy is not

to be expected among lawbreaking morons. But mildly clever, in its way.

"The imitation—by a machine or by a good mimic—of a cat-fight; then the net or whatever else was held here in readiness for the collie to run into as he came around the bend; the weeks of studying my habits which taught you I walk here late every afternoon; the watching for me to set out from camp to-day; the—"

He ceased his drawled surmises and turned with polite interest to the wall of green, close beside him. There was a light rustling. Then out into the path noiselessly stepped a fifth masked man.

He inclined his head slightly to Ethan, saying as he did so:

"Mr. Brock, I hope my friends have not frightened you unduly or hurt you in any way."

"Mr. Kidnaper," rejoined Ethan, "I hope you have not been any rougher with my dog than your dogs here have been with me."

"Your dog is not hurt, sir," said the man, a tinge of approval in his suave tones at the oldster's contemptuous calm. "He ran headlong into the net. We wrapped him into it and slipped a muzzle over those very energetic jaws of his. Then we carried him away. Not far. Just to leave the scene clear for the—"

"The kidnaping?" finished Ethan. "I see. Thanks for not harming him. It shall be remembered in your favor when I get you all by the heels. It may even shorten your sentence by a year or so; if I have any influence with the courts. Which I have. You see, the dog is dear to me. He alone. And now shall we get down to business? I know perfectly well what you want. I was practically certain of it as soon as I saw these Carnival Ball ruffians of

yours. I was wholly sure, as soon as you spoke."

THE men moved slightly, glancing at one another.

"You poor blundering crooks always leave the right thing undone," pursued Brock. "You took much pains to cover up your faces. But you left your hands naked. That was an error. I study hands much more closely than I study faces and I have profited much thereby, during the past few decades or more. Humans often can assume poker faces, but few of them have the wit to assume poker fingers."

"A man may have the face of sublime innocence. But when he tells me a lie, or when he is startled or excited, his hands tend to clench. Quite so. I note you're all relaxing your fingers very sheepishly. Also there is much to be learned of a man's position in the world, from the various inklings afforded by his hands. If one has learned the key to it all, as I have."

He darted his fiery black eyes from one to another of his captors. Two of them thrust their hands behind their backs.

"Too late!" Ethan told them, almost apologetically. "I've made my observations. None of you men belong to what is known as 'the criminal classes.' You are criminals of a far higher order. You would not even call yourselves professional crooks. Your type of lawbreaker is probed less often by a police court judge than by a Senate committee."

"I am afraid we must hurry," interposed the fifth man, his voice as suave as ever; yet, Brock noted, with a shade less assurance in it than when last he had spoken. "If you will pardon me—"

"One moment, please," protested Ethan. "Whether we hurry or not to the place you plan to hide me depends somewhat on your acceptance of my one condition. I will be brief. Besides, nobody is coming. Your lookouts would warn you in ample time. You do not plan to murder me. That would be too dangerous. As for holding me for ransom—well, you or those you work for have a thorough knowledge of my character.

"You—or they—know that I do not value my life. You—or they—know that if I were held for ransom, I should let myself be tortured to death sooner than authorize my associates to pay one penny. Only one thing remains, as your motive. It took me scarcely a minute to work out the very silly problem.

"You are taking me somewhere to hold me *incomunicado*—you know what *incomunicado* means, especially your shortest mummer, you with the typical Andalusian hands—to hold me in that way until well after the quarterly meeting of the C. G. & X., two days from now."

He turned with modest pride toward the only masked man who had spoken.

"I see your hands are tight shut," said Ethan. "They snapped shut like a trap's jaws when I spoke of the C. G. & X. Really you are a very uncontrolled scoundrel. You should learn to keep a better hold on your nerves. But let that go. You people—or your employers—know that if I don't appear there, if I send no word, no instructions, Mr. Belknap and his clique will be able to swing the meeting and block my merger project; and force a payment or a passing of dividend, whichever way they have planned to manipulate the market.

"They can vote the several changes

I have been opposing, too. On second thought, they are planning to vote the dividend. That will rocket the stock and they can make their killing. Then they can hop onto the other side of the market and get ready to ride down the slump that is due to follow the news that I have disappeared and that I am not likely to come back.

"They'll start that rumor at the right time; just as they'll keep it mum until after the quarterly meeting. By the time you get word to turn me loose, they will have milked the possibilities dry and they will be so heavy with cash that they won't be able to walk. And the road I have spent my life in building up will be a wreck.

"Thugs and underworlders would not understand the jargon I've been talking," he finished. "But I see—chiefly again from your hands—that you men followed every detail of it. Now then—where are you taking me? It's getting dark and the night air does things to my rheumatism."

"We are taking you where you will be made comfortable in every way, Mr. Brock," said the spokesman, his smooth voice now abrim with unconcealable worry. "And I am glad you are wise enough to come with us willingly. We—"

"Who said I would come with you willingly?" demanded Ethan. "That's the thing I am making a condition on. Accept the condition and I promise to go quietly. Refuse it, and you'll drag me by force; fighting every step of the way. A struggle is not the best thing for my shaky heart. And you may well have a corpse to hang for, instead of a prisoner to go to jail for. The condition is this: Wherever you take me, I want my dog to go along. I am never lonely when he is with me. I'll order him not to attack you, and he will obey

me. Well, does Bruce share my prison?"

"Certainly, sir," assented the spokesman, in evident relief that the condition was so light. "I'll bring him to you at once. Then, I must ask you to let me blindfold you. We'll take off the bandage as soon as we get to where we're going. One of us will lead you on either side until we come to the car."

HE disappeared into the woods. In less than a minute he was back again, carrying in his arms with much difficulty a raging and squirming collie, which snapped impotently with muzzled jaws at every part of his captor's body that came within reach. The man set him down beside Ethan. Bruce flung himself at the nearest masked man.

"Down, Bruce!" commanded Ethan. "Let them alone. Let them alone, I said!"

Instantly, yet with strong reluctance, the collie desisted from his futile effort to dig his teeth into his victim. With a look of worry in his deep-set eyes he ranged alongside his master, staring up into the expressionless old face as if for a clew to this puzzling turn of events.

Again, at Ethan's order, the dog forbore to interfere when the spokesman gently blindfolded Brock and when a man on either side proceeded to lead him off the trail and into the deeper woods.

Ten minutes of necessarily slow walking brought Ethan's feet into contact with a rutted woodroad. He was lifted to the rear seat of a car; Bruce springing in and sitting beside him. The car bumped and reeled and joggled along, at a snail's pace, for nearly half an hour.

Then it halted. Ethan was lifted out, and led for perhaps another hundred yards. He was guided up a flight of steps and across a narrow porch and in through a front doorway and down a somewhat long hall. Thence he was led through yet another doorway; and a door was closed behind him. The bandage was taken from his eyes.

Blinking about him the old man took in his surroundings. Had he been a frequenter of the movies he might well have expected to find himself in a tumbledown shack at a river's edge or in a gloomy cellar with chain-rings in the walls. He was in no such melodramatic place.

Instead he stood in the middle of a largish room, furnished in elaborately rustic fashion. A camp living room of sorts; also available as a bedchamber, judging by the spacious camp couch and by a chest of drawers. Through a half-open door Brock had a glimpse of a well-appointed bathroom.

Past doubt, this place was the little fishing-and-shooting lodge of some well-to-do man from Granite. Past doubt, also—for it would be ridiculously easy, later, for any searchers to find and identify it—Ethan's kidnapers had commandeered its use; in the absence of whoever might own it and without his knowledge.

Bruce was straying about the room, sniffing and exploring. Ethan's gaze shifted toward the three windows. All were open. But all were rendered impassable by reason of strong outside shutters, tightly barred. Darkness had fallen. But bracketed oil lamps made the room cheery. The spokesman broke the brief silence.

"I hope you will be comfortable here, Mr. Brock," he said. "It is not as rustically sumptuous as the Charles camp. But it was the best we could

get. Dinner will be brought in here to you whenever you're ready. We found plenty of clean bed linen in the presses, but no pyjamas. So I put an extra pair of my own on your pillows, over there. I hope they will come near enough to fitting you.

"If you care to read, there are several books on that shelf. If you care to write, I see there is a scratchpad on the desk. I'll lend you my own fountain pen, if you haven't one. I suggest you don't try to get out through the windows. The shutters are fastened, and two of us will be on guard out there all night. Another of us will be just outside this room. Rap on the door whenever you want anything. And let me know what time you'd like breakfast."

He and the men who had entered with him filed out. When one of them came back soon afterward carrying the laden dinner tray, old Ethan was slumped low in front of the hearth fire, his tired feet to the blaze, his head sunk drowsily on his chest. Bruce sprawled on the hearth beside him.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MESSAGE.

"I SUPPOSE you know," remarked Ethan, as the man arranged the meal on the center table, "I suppose you know you poor novices haven't a chance to escape prison for this abduction? You would be much wiser, for your own sakes, to kill me out of hand. There is where you would have some slight chance against me. But when you pit your puny intellects against mine, as you're doing—well, there can be only one outcome to it. Tell the others what I say."

The man made no reply. He con-

tinued laying the dinner; then withdrew. Nor did he speak when he came back for the tray, after Ethan had finished with it.

Apparently the hearty meal took away Brock's earlier fatigue and even stirred him to activity, for he seated himself at the desk, drawing his fountain pen from his waistcoat pocket, and pulled the large scratchpad toward him. Instantly he began to scribble.

Twice during the evening one or another of the white-masked men looked in, ostensibly to replenish the hearth fire. Neither time did Brock so much as raise his head to look at them. He continued to write concentratedly, rapidly. For three full hours he toiled thus.

Somewhat after midnight he pounded crossly at the door. At once the man on guard outside opened it. In his captor's ill-fitting white pyjamas Ethan faced him. Bruce was dancing about in stark excitement.

"Here!" fumed Brock. "Let out this dog of mine, for a while, won't you? He's smelled a cat or a rabbit, out there, and he keeps waking me to let him get after it. How can I sleep when he—"

He broke off with a grunt, as the big collie dashed along the passageway and into the darkness beyond.

"If I'd known he was going to make a crazy fool of himself all night," grunted Ethan, "I wouldn't have asked you amateur criminals to let me have him in here with me. I'm old. And I need my sleep. He'll scratch at the front door, or at this door, if the front door is open, when he wants to come back. When he does, for Heaven's sake let him in. If you don't he'll bark outside my window till daylight. Then none of us will get any sleep."

Grumbling, muttering in senile

fashion, Ethan potted back to bed, blowing out the lamp on the stand, and crawling rheumatically in between the sheets. The guard shut the door and locked it.

Just after sunrise the spokesman came softly into the room. Ethan was lying on his back, his leathery mouth ajar. He was snoring. The man stood on the threshold, hesitating to wake him.

As he debated, Brock opened his eyes and looked at him. The old man did not stare about, after the manner of the newly-awakened in a strange place. His faculties were as alert as though he had not slept at all.

"OH, good morning, Mr. First Conspirator!" he hailed the masker, in sardonic goodfellowship. "I was afraid it was one of your temporarily deaf-mute friends. I'm glad it's the one member of the absurd gang who has been chosen to do all the talking. How soon can I eat?"

"Whenever you like, sir," said the spokesman, adding in genuine wonder, "but would you mind telling me how you knew it is I and not one of the others? We're all about of a size. And our clothes and our masks are identical. How did you know—?"

"By your hands, of course," grinned Brock. "I told you it had been my hobby—a mighty profitable one, at that—for the past forty-odd years, to make a study of hands, rather than faces. Well, I studied your hands rather closely, yesterday. I would recognize them anywhere. I shall be quite ready to swear to them, in court; or in any lineup of crooks."

The man's fingers clenched, instinctively. Then he put his hands behind his back and proceeded with the

errand which had brought him to the room.

"I would not have had you waked so early, sir," he said, uncomfortably, "but your dog has not come back yet. I was standing in the front doorway when he went galloping past me late last night just as I heard you tell the man at your own door to let him out. You said he would be back soon and you asked to have him let in.

"An hour or so ago, when he hadn't gotten back, I sent two men to look through the woods for him. I thought he might have been caught in some fox-trap. But they couldn't find a trace of him. Not even when they skirted the Charles camp buildings. We thought he might have gone back there. But he hadn't. I—I didn't want you to think any of us had harmed him and—"

"And incur extra time in jail for doing it?" supplemented Brock. "No, even you morons wouldn't be crazy enough for that. Don't worry. Bruce often goes on an all-night rabbit hunt. He'll turn up safe and sound, before long. He always does. Breakfast is a mightier lure to him than rabbits. If he goes to the Charles camp instead of here, they'll look after him."

Without doubt, Ethan's long hours of writing had been reported to him, and he seemed to be seeking the results of the steady scribbling. The scratchpad lay in its usual place; sadly depleted in thickness. But no written sheets lay stacked near it. His gaze drifted to the waste-basket on the floor beside the desk. It was half-full of a raffle of torn scraps of paper.

Apparently, Ethan Brock had not been satisfied with his literary efforts, whatever they may have been. The man made mental note of the raffle. Brock smiled to himself, then stretched and

slowly crawled out of bed. Midway in the process he heard the padding of rapid feet in the hallway outside. Bruce ran into the room.

"See!" exulted Ethan, grasping the collie's fluffy mane with both hands and shaking it in affectionate roughness. "I told you he'd come back by breakfast time. He always does. Bruce, you disreputable old ragamuffin, your coat is stuck together with every variety of burr and cockleweed east of the Mississippi. And your legs are black with mud. You're tuckered out, with your absurd night's hunting. I wonder why I harbor such a brute."

The dog had greeted his master with his wonted eagerness. But now he lay down heavily on the hearthrug. In another second he was sleeping like the dead. He was completely exhausted.

"He's always like that after his all-night hunts," said Brock, in ostentatious disgust. "It's odd he doesn't learn better, from experience. But dogs are disgustingly human."

The masked man was brushing clean the hearth. Now he picked up the two lamps and tucked the waste-basket under his arm and left the room. Half-way down the hall he set down his burdens on a bench and proceeded to take from the basket a double handful of paper scraps.

These bits of the scratchpad's pages he scanned at first eagerly. Then his jaw dropped. Next, he emptied out the basket's entire contents on the bench.

Each and every fragment of torn scratchpad paper was blank; on both sides.

A QUARTER of an hour later Brock's breakfast was served by another of the masked men. With him also the man had brought a panful of table scraps for Bruce. But

the collie did not lift his head, nor open his eyes. He was still gripped by slumber; a slumber far too deep for the paw-scratchings and muffled barks which sometimes accompanied his dreams.

Brock ate his breakfast in leisurely fashion. Then, before he pounded for the man to come and take away the tray, he reread twice a twist of soiled paper. This bit of writing he then consigned to the fire. After which he mumbled under his breath to the sleeping collie:

"Only one more fish to be caught, Brucie, boy! Then the whole thing will be complete. Now, let's sit back and watch the show. I hope we won't catch that 'one more' fish. But something tells me we will."

Toward noon Ethan Brock looked up from a book he was trying to read by such light as filtered through the shutters' heart-shaped apertures; as the spokesman came striding nervously into the room.

"I expected you before now," Brock hailed him. "I see my perfectly good plan failed."

The old man's face was weary and discouraged as he spoke. He looked like one who had staked his all, and lost. He peered at the masked visitor from the sunken eyes of infinite age and misery.

"Just the same," he added, "it was a good plan. A *good* plan, Mr. First Conspirator. And I'm less sorry for its failure than that my trusted secretary should have proved himself a traitor."

The spokesman essayed twice to speak; twice thought better of it; then said, grimly:

"I don't know anything about your 'trusted secretary' and about a 'traitor,' Mr. Brock. But I do know *this*."

From his shirt he produced a packet of paper. It was made up of sheets similar to those of the scratch-pad. They were close-folded and doubled and were held together by a stout rubber band. He handed them to Ethan, who glanced keenly at the outer sheet, then let the packet fall unheeded to the floor. He looked infinitely old and beaten; a sight to rouse pity in the worst of his countless enemies.

"One of my men," said the masker, "drove down as far as Balderston—some twenty miles from here, on the road to Granite—for supplies. We did not dare buy, closer to this place, for fear of being identified later. He happened to notice a bit of white hanging to a barbed wire fence, close beside the road—as if it had been scraped off some one or something that wriggled through the fence, to cut off distance at that wide bend.

"He stopped to see what it was. It was that group of close-written sheets and those two letters you have just been looking at. In brief, Mr. Brock, it was a set of instructions concerning to-morrow's meeting of the C. G. & X. directors, addressed to Judge Griggs; and inclosed with a note to one Carter, telling him to deliver it to Griggs and telling of your imprisonment."

"You amaze me!" mumbled Ethan, with a show of unconcerned mockery that would not have deceived a child.

THE spokesman continued: "If this set of instructions and campaign plans had reached this man named Carter—whoever he may be—Judge Griggs would have had the power to upset all the plans of our friends at the quarterly meeting to-morrow. By a miracle, they were intercepted.

"You were writing all last evening.

To throw us off the track, you tore up blank paper into bits and put it in the wastebasket. You fastened the pages you had actually written, to your collie, and had told him to take it to this unknown Carter. I read, during the war, of collies carrying messages to any one whose name and location they knew. This dog of yours must have been trained in the same way. But, wriggling through that barbed wire fence, to take a short cut, he lost the message. I ought to shoot him."

"Shoot him!" screamed Ethan Brock, leaping to his feet. "If you do, I swear by the Eternal that I'll spend a million dollars to trace you; and another two thousand dollars to a dependable trigger man to empty a sub-machine gun into you! That dog is the one friend I have. I realize it, now, as I never realized it. If he dies through your fault, you and every member of your family will follow him.

"There, there!" he grumbled. "I'm sorry I lost my temper. Be content with your victory. I pledge you my word—my oath, if you prefer—that the dog shall carry no more messages while I am here. Let him stay with me. For your own sake. See!"

As he spoke, he stooped over Bruce and dug his hands again deep into the mighty ruff. The stiff fingers fumbled far down in that mass of fluffy fur. Then they emerged; holding Bruce's collar.

"I had this clip made for it," he explained. "The clip we always fasten messages in. Take it, if you don't trust me. Or examine him, every time he leaves the room, to see if any writing is fastened anywhere to him. But don't harm him. It will go much easier for you all if he stays alive."

As the man departed, Ethan slumped back into his hearthside chair.

"Brucie!" he whispered miserably, to the sleeping dog. "We were right. Carter *is* in on it. They've bought him. Do you blame me, Brucie, for saying you're the only one of the lot I can trust, a hundred per cent? All a lonely and cranky old man, like me, can hope to get is what he can buy over the counter. Generally not even that.

"Carter! I—I kind of halfway trusted the boy. He was nice. He seemed clean. I got my first doubt of him when that man reached in my breast pocket for the gun. Hardly any one carries a gun there, Brucie. So I figured somebody at home had tipped him."

Ethan Brock spent the next thirty hours quietly in his pleasant prison room; Bruce with him except when Ethan ordered him out for exercise.

AS dusk fell on the third night since his capture Brock stood silent and tense; his ear pressed close to the shutter of one of the windows. For an hour he had stood thus. At last through the twilight silences of the forest there sounded far off a faintly shrill whistle. It was followed at regular intervals by a second and a third; and then by three more in fast succession. Brock nodded approval. Going to the door, he hammered at the panel, calling for the spokesman to be sent to him. Presently the masked man came in.

There was a droop to the leader's figure and bearing; a stricken aspect. Brock eyed him keenly.

"The bad news has just reached you?" he cackled. "I'm afraid so. You look it. And there's worse. You youngsters ought not to challenge us oldsters. 'It's safer playing with the lion's cub than with the lion that's dying,' you know."

The masker made as though to lock

the door behind him as usual. Brock said:

"Don't bother to do that. It's too late, now. The sorry game is up, my friend. Your crowd in Granite has played it—as cleverly as a kindergarten child would play poker with an oldtime Mississippi River gambler. And with the same result.

"The night you brought me here I wrote out in duplicate my instructions to Judge Griggs. One of those two sets of orders and authorizations I addressed to my secretary, Carter, with a note telling him to turn them over to Griggs. The other set I addressed to my chauffeur, Geoghan.

"I wrote to Geoghan to turn the first set over to Carter, unopened, and to say Bruce had brought them; and to take the second set to Griggs. I made secret marks on the outside page of Carter's set. It was the set you brought back to me with a cock-and-bull story of your man finding it in a wire fence. That is how I knew Carter is in with you."

The masker started, then recovered his nerve by manifest effort. The tired old voice continued:

"In the other packet, along with my duplicate stuff, I wrote to Griggs a careful description of this room's specifications. I told him to go to the county court house and find the plans for such a house and room, and where it was, and what architect had planned it. Very simple, my dear novice. I also took the liberty of cutting off the laundry mark from the pyjamas which you admitted were yours; and I sent it to Griggs to be traced.

"I gave him orders to let me know, at this hour, whether or not he had succeeded in getting the C. G. & X. dividend passed and the merger put through and the other arrangements of

the opposition crowd broken up—which will strip them bare of cash and smash them like caterpillars—and if he could locate this house, from the architect's plans; with a posse of State police.

"The affirmative signal was to be a certain number of police whistle toots, blown in a certain sequence—just five minutes before the posse should close in on us. I—

"Dear me, Brucie!" Ethan interrupted himself, in mild astonishment. "The poor chap ran away as if the devil was after him. Listen to that annoying din outside, Brucie. The State police must be closing in. And, Brucie, you're the cause of it all, old chum.

"If you hadn't proved you could find your way back home, by your following me there three weeks ago, if you hadn't understood and obeyed when I fastened that big packet to your clip and when I said: 'Take it to Geoghan—to *Geoghan*,' where would you and I be now, as far as our chances of freedom go; and where would be the army of poor people who trust my way of

running the C. G. & X., Brucie? Tell me that, you—you gorgeous pal of mine!"

"Griggs," observed Ethan Brock, next day, "I want you to buy in the Charles camp for me. It's on the market. That camp has taught me something, this past month or so. It's taught me there are better things than finance, and better places to live in than a crowded city. Besides, it's done Bruce a lot of good. He and I are going to spend six months a year there, after this. I'm changing its name to The Brockbruce Camp.

"And never mind pressing the case against Carter and those other poor bunglers and masked incompetents of Belknap's. They've paid enough. They're squashed flat, every one of them.

"Bruce!" he interrupted himself, "if you knew how foolish and vacuous you look when you're scratching, you'd never do it again. The only two who can live as cheaply as one are a dog and his flea!"

THE END.

